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ABSTRACT

In 1994, Australian Catholic University personnel and 14 K-12 Catholic school teachers collaborated on an action research project to promote professional growth. The K-12 Professional Development Program involved classroom teachers in action research through which they could identify ways to create partnerships with parents. The action research approach encouraged collaborative reflection and provided opportunities for investigating a problem of professional practice. Researchers collected data from journals, journal interviews, and followup interviews with teachers. Data analysis indicated that after initial reservations and uncertainty with the action research process (due to a lack of clearly identified end goals), teachers found their involvement to be of great benefit, both professionally and personally. For some, this was in their understanding of parent-teacher relationships, and for others, it was in the skills they gained in communicating with parents. Most teachers identified the collaboration and support of action research team members and the outside consultants as pivotal to their continuing with their plans. However, the key issue remained the personal significance and control offered teachers in the selection of issues of interest to them. An appendix outlines the process of the K-12 Professional Development Program. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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"You didn't tell us what to do"

Teacher Perceptions of Action Research

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Paper presented at the
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Abstract

The traditional expert delivery model of provision for inservice training with teachers has been shown to have limitations for long term understanding and professional growth. As an alternative, a facilitated action research program offers the opportunity for teachers to identify areas of interest and their associated individual professional development needs. Such a program has been implemented throughout 1994 by Australian Catholic University personnel with a cohort of teachers (K-12) from six Catholic Schools in a provincial town.

Teachers worked on research projects as follows:

* academic motivation
* pastoral care
* parent teacher partnerships

The perceptions of teachers are reported. It was found that after initial reservations and uncertainty with the action research process, teachers found their involvement to be of great benefit both professionally and personally. This paper reports on the process of action research as undertaken in this project and on the findings of research on teacher thinking.

Introduction

Recent attention has been paid to the nature and extent of the professio lisation of teaching and the need for life-long teacher education (Kremer-Hayon, 1987; Mc e, 1992). According to Korthagen (1993), this has resulted in an increased focus on reflection and reflective teaching. There is a growing demand for teachers at both pre-service and in-service levels in education to develop reflective capacities in order to complement knowledge and technical capacities (Valli, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). Valli (1992) found teacher comfort with reflective activities to be influenced by their perceptions of the function, value, and nature of the process. Schon (1983) similarly supports the notion that reflection is the process by which the knowledge base of effective professional practice is constructed and refined.

Professional development education has a fundamental aim to improve practice not just to produce knowledge "by developing the practitioner's capacity for discrimination and judgement in particular, complex human situations" (Elliott, 1991, p. 52). Inservice training of school based teachers traditionally has occurred through the transmission of preselected content to largely passive recipients. Adult learning principles suggest that education is a good deal more than mere learning. It requires the active involvement of the educand in the process of learning, with the concept of active learning as the crucial element of this theory. When applied to professional development such principles result in an emphasis on learners being actively engaged with the content and processes of his/her learning in such a way that professional development does in fact occur. A facilitated action research program is one approach which meets this challenge.

K-12 Professional Development Program: Parent Teacher Partnerships through Personal Development Education

The pilot project ran from April to November, 1994, with teachers from Catholic schools in a provincial New South Wales town. With a focus on professional development and reflective practices, the challenge presented in the *K-12 Professional Development Program* was to involve classroom teachers in an action research process through which they could identify ways to work towards partnerships with parents.

The action research approach of the project encouraged collaborative reflection and provided opportunities for investigating a problem of professional practice. (Appendix A is an outline of the process of the *K-12 Professional Development Program*). Action research is a form of professional development to which teachers are unaccustomed and with which they may be uncomfortable. This research aims to report on teacher perceptions of involvement in the action learning process, attitudes towards the content of the project and the nature of the process itself.

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was adopted to reveal the experiences of participants as these are expressed through diaries and interviews. Qualitative techniques recognise the reflective character of educational research. Such research also seeks to understand the persons involved, their behaviour and perceptions, and the influence of the physical and psychological environment or context on them. Such is the focus in this research: to understand the perceptions of teachers as they undertake action research in the area of parent teacher partnerships. This paper reports on one section of the research.

Participants

Teachers from six Catholic parish schools — three primary and three campuses of the secondary school — were invited to volunteer to be involved in the project facilitated by two lecturers from the Australian Catholic University. The first Twilight Seminar was held in May to introduce the project. Of the 33 teachers who initially attended the introductory seminar, 24

expressed a willingness to continue the process with 14 teachers completing the project, seven from primary schools, four from the regional high school 7-10, two from the senior secondary school and one from the vocational college. Of the participants, six were male and eight female. The teaching experiences ranged from two years to over twenty years experience across diverse settings in Australia and overseas.

Data Collection.

Data were collected from journals, journal interviews and follow-up interviews. The analysis of the data followed a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in which data collection, analysis and theory stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other. Journals were maintained by the participants throughout the process. Following an initial handout to the teachers about journal writing, journals were collected, photocopied and responded to three times through the project. Interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed. The journal entries and typed transcripts were analysed for content and style. The data were read again to identify specific themes following Benjamin (1990, p.14) who has described a theme as "any set of words, phrases or sentences which coherently reflected a specific underlying meaning, feeling or activity."

Findings

The information yielded by analysis of the data highlighted emergent issues and themes. These related to initial reactions to the process, perceptions of the role of triads, teacher image, perceptions of parents. In reporting the findings, attention has been given to relating perceptions to specific sections of the process. For the most part participant's words have been used to illustrate the findings. These are written in italics.

Introductory Session: *He told us he'd like us all to go.*

Participants attended the introductory twilight seminar in response to an invitation to all teachers in the parish. The initial motivation for partaking in the pilot project was found to vary widely. For some it was seen as a chance for personal and professional renewal with other colleagues in an area of their choosing and interest.

> *The cream of the parish teaching profession is here. If for no other reason, this is a great idea. A chance to exchange ideas with people I have been meaning to catch up with for a long time.*

For others the reasons were pragmatic.

> *I am on a contract and this may help me get a full time job.*

Some teachers reported a reluctance at first, but attended because of perceived pressure from school administration.

> *On this campus it was almost a case of, you know you see it in the movies, that they call for volunteers and everyone else steps back so far and one is left.*

Whereas for some of the teachers attending the seminar there was personal choice and motivation, for others it was an obligation to their principal. All arrived without a clear idea of either the process of action research or of the exact nature of the inservice content.

Perceptions of Action Research: *You didn't tell us what to do*

The preliminary invitation identified parent—teacher partnerships and personal development as key issues in an action research based inservice program. The initial session of the program had a commonly identified response. Participants varyingly reported they were

confused and unsure in relation to the process of the inservice project, in addition to the content of the project. Typically these were either journal comments:

> *Being a structured type of person I had hoped for clearer directions as to the classroom teacher's role in this project.*
>
> *I was left wondering if the expectations were relatively simple or if I had missed the point altogether.*

or interview comments:

> *I felt confused*
> *At first I was not quite sure. I like to know what the goal is.*
> *I thought it was going to be more of an inservice, straight into it, whereas it wasn't.*

A re-emergent concern of participants in the early stages of the project was the motivation of the researchers - what we would get out of it.

> *Not sure what you want and what you are expecting*

This uncertainty was linked to uncertainty of what researchers expected of the participants. Ownership was identified by one participant when referring to his action plan.

> *I want it to become my project within <u>your</u> scheme.*

Identification of area for action plan: *All at sea*

The identification of a problem area on which to focus their action plans occurred at the second twilight seminar. This was a difficult task for teachers as was coming to terms with the process of a form of inservice which differed from their previous experiences. Repeatedly the comment was made that teachers were unsure of what they were to do.

> *I'm still not quite sure about a specific objective for the action research plan.*

The participants reported being used to attending inservice which would give them a list of information, a recipe for them to follow and lots of good ideas for teaching. In this project, teachers were offered control of their professional development through identification of a need they had and planning how they could address this need. Teacher thinking about their problems and action plans was facilitated through the interactions afforded them through the whole group sessions conducted by the facilitators and subsequent triad meetings.

> *Through talking it seemed more like something I wanted to do.*
>
> *Our first meeting was better than I thought, the other members helped me to clarify my ideas and reshape them as well as offer other suggestions.*

Casual conversations, *it was just a couple of casual words*, also were reported as significant in the decision making associated with problem and action plan identification. A proforma for listening to the ideas of others gave the listening teachers some prompts for areas in which to question their colleagues as part of facilitating the communication process with people who were essentially strangers. Teachers highlighted difficulties of communication, not only between teachers and parents but also among themselves.

Implementation

Having identified a problem and prepared a plan of action, teachers began to implement their action plans. The following extracts from case studies highlight the individual nature of action research based professional development.

Case Study 1.

I was interested in the Parent-Teacher Partnership project to enhance my own personal development and to improve in an area of teaching I had neglected. I have always believed parents are an integral part of the education process but have never given it the time, in thought or action, that it deserves.

In choosing a project, I wanted it to be useful , workable and attainable. The idea of a teacher initiated project was more appealing than being given an area of focus. I decided to target my pastoral care class. In having established a good relationship with the students, I decided involvement with the parents would be of benefit to everyone. I wanted the parents to begin to see me as a link into the school.

I began with a letter to inform the parents of some of the activities Year 10 would be involved with over the coming months (assessment tasks, subject selection for yr. 11, work experience placements etc.). I invited their involvement in these decisions and suggested they contact me if they had any questions or concerns about these happenings. A more personal contact by phone was made to ensure an understanding of the above mentioned activities and to encourage further communication. Finally a social evening was held with parents and students so that face to face interaction could occur.

Opening Communication with Pastoral Care Class Parents: Yr 10

Case Study 2.

The initial gathering of teachers and facilitators was a walk into unchartered professional territory. It was the catalyst for many questions. I was curious to know the format of "Action Research" over the next eight months.

As a professional development experience I was used to knowing where I was going and what steps had to be taken to get there. This had been my conditioned response in the past. But unfortunately Action Research didn't provide similar immediate satisfaction to my curiosity. Instead its structure was slow in emerging. This was a different model and I was finding that I had no preconditioned mindset to assist my direction. Action research needed clarification at our initial meeting. To me it appeared to rely on the "informal communication and reflection" much more than the formal model I was used to. In the early stages this didn't sit comfortably with someone who is task oriented. By the end it was achieving more than I had anticipated.

From my experiences as a teacher at a Senior College, I had become concerned at the apparent reluctance among most male students to get involved and participate in the school based curricular and co-curricular activities. The Action Research project offered me a vehicle to address this problem. The opportunity for collaboration with selected parents and students appealed to me. This would help foster the partnership of which we are part by engaging more parents in the total education process. The second twilight meeting I attended gave me a focus for the first time. It also gave me a strategy - a self styled strategy - not a text book one. It allowed me to develop a time-line in which to implement an action plan. It obliged me to engage parents and students as well as other professionals (triad members) from which to gain feedback and refine the process and strategy.

My action plan focused on raising the profile of three year 11 male students through the development of strategies and opportunities in collaboration with chosen students and their parents.

Motivation of Boys in a Senior Secondary College

Case Study 3.
The focus of my research project was to provide opportunities which would aid in the development of a sense of community amongst families, parents and children of my year one class.
I chose this focus because as a parent with 7 years of involvement in primary schooling, I felt there were many parents that I didn't know or knew only briefly.
I believed that if parents were invited to meet socially on a class basis (with no other agenda e.g. fundraising) from the initial years of their children's schooling, then they would feel more at ease/familiar with each other, their children's friends and teachers. I felt that despite the project being small it had the potential for many positive spinoffs.
Parent—Teacher Partnerships in Primary School

Collaboration in Triads: *Confidence to share*

The third step in the action research process was the formation of triads/ action research teams. Based on the notion that groups bonded together would have a responsibility not solely to themselves to complete the project but also to others, action research teams were formed with small groups of teachers. There was an implicit notion of motivation based on collegiality. The success of the triads varied. All groups reported that time was a difficulty in the regard to the frequency of meetings. Teachers in groups which were on separate campuses reported difficulties in meeting with triad members and related these specifically to being at different schools. Groups that were based on common school levels, that is, all primary teachers reported a greater feeling of satisfaction with the groups than groups formed across school levels, secondary/primary, secondary/senior college. Reasons offered for this included the availability of contact and familiarity with, if not a sharing of, the context and the issues.

Where teachers from the same campus were in the same triad group, as occurred at the junior secondary school, teachers reported that frequency of contact increased outside of the triad meetings. This is consistent with the notion of *teaming on the run* reported by O'Connor (1992), whereby teachers discuss important issues as they think of them and in passing. The seemingly transitory communications that occur as teachers wait for classes or walk to classes gained a new focus for triad members. *Instead of the weather, we now talk about our projects or issues related to them.* Having several teachers from the one school undertaking the inservice was also seen as *much more effective in that a few of us are doing it here so we can start thinking of the school and the ideas applied to the school. The projects give you a starting point.*

Creating networks started at a basic level of teachers getting to know other teachers. In journal notes, one teacher had described, in an early entry, an interaction with another teacher at the workshop session as *working with another lady, she's in year 3.* Later in the journal, after triads had been formed, names became used. Familiarity had been established. From working together teachers reported developing a *confidence to share* and that they didn't *feel so alone.* The aloneness of teaching is an important consideration in the provision of inservice. The sharing of information became a focal point for some triad groups. Each time they met one or another would report on articles they had read an recommend them to the others. One teacher recorded that triad meetings encouraged members *to make a more conscious effort to read different articles.*
Kormanski and Mozenter (1987) have reported that commitment was an essential element of team formation. This is evidenced throughout the study.

Conclusion

Teacher reflection on the process of facilitated action research and on their own action plans has been an inherent part of this pilot project. Thus far, data from research in progress suggests that the teachers who remained with the project, having initially found difficulties with a lack of clearly identified end goals, made significant gains in their professional development. For some participants this was in their understanding of parent-teacher relationships whereas others gained skills in practices of communication with parents. Most teachers identified the collaboration and support of action research team members and the outside consultants as pivotal to their continuing with their plans. However the key issue remains the personal significance and control offered teachers in the selection of issues of interest and concern to them.

Case Study 1.

The project seems very simple but I believe it's a beginning for myself. Through the project I have become more aware of parental involvement and the need for teachers to initiate and encourage parental involvement. There were four of us on staff working on various projects and I believe through our readings, triad meetings and individual projects we now have a greater commitment to involve parents in a more meaningful way. We have discussed possibilities of how parental partnership could be introduced at the beginning of a new school year.

There will always be obstacles and the need to evaluate steps taken, but the concept of partnership can only enhance the idea of a shared sense of purpose, respect and trust for one another. The benefits will be forthcoming for the teacher, parent and particularly the student.

Opening Communication with Pastoral Care Class Parents: Yr 10

Participants overall reported feeling unsure and confused with their initial involvement in what was for many their first experience with a non-traditional approach to inservice training. The following excerpt from a case study serves to summarise such feelings.

> *The action research process is peppered by insecurities. Working against a traditional background of formal professional development which is top down, it challenged me to be more collaborative, made me interact regularly with parents and students with a positive focus, but gave me no direction. However it promoted autonomy in professional development, was eventually satisfying due to its flexibility. It generated its content from parent, student and staff responses or reactions. It evolved to serve specific individual circumstances and included parents in an unthreatened scenario to support the strong partnerships towards which we are all working.*

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Appendix A

Action Research

There were three distinct strands to the *K-12 Professional Development Program*:

1. Teacher Twilight Seminars
2. Action Research by teachers
3. Action Research Teams

Each of these strands offered challenges to teachers as they engaged in the action research process.

1. Twilight Seminars

Following an initial Twilight Seminar, subsequent seminars focused on action research methodology and the nature of parent-teacher partnerships. In addition to the process development for their identified professional needs, teachers requested and were given specific input about parent teacher communication. Folios of readings related to the topics of the inservice were supplied to each school cohort.

2. Action Research

Steps in the action research process are as follows:

1. Teachers identify a key issue they wish to address at the classroom level of decision making.
2. An action plan is formulated to address the issue and implemented by the teacher.
3. Teachers reflect on the implementation process and evaluate their plans, making changes where required.
4. Revised plans are implemented.

Action plans in this project have been written in the following areas:

Motivation of Senior Students
Parent Participation in Personal Development
Student Evaluation and Parent Teacher Information
Building Relationships with Parents: Breaking down the barriers
Development of self esteem

3. Action Research Teams/Triads

Action research teams were formed with small groups of teachers. The aim of the teams was to provide collegial support with a timetable of support meetings arranged by the participants. The initial action research session and the subsequent first team meeting were facilitated by the researchers with following meetings alternating between team self facilitation and support from the external facilitator.